

# Putting our lives where our mouths are

*A sermon on Ephesians 4:25-5:2 by Nathan Nettleton, 11th August 2024*

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## Message

The measure of the value of our worship is the measure of the transformation of our lives into imitations of the love and kindness of Jesus.

## Sermon

This week is a major anniversary of something quite big that happened in the life of our church. It was exactly twenty five years ago this week that we closed down our Sunday morning worship service, and started our Sunday evening worship service in its much more liturgical and sacramental style. Of course, there was another big change more recently when covid forced it online and we then decided to continue it online permanently. But although that changed the way we encountered the liturgy, the change 25 years ago was a much bigger change to the shape and content of the liturgy itself.

So happy anniversary! Of course, only a handful of you were here at the time. Jill, Shelley, Robert, Margie, and Acacia who was only 15 months old at the time. I think that's all. But all of you are the inheritors of that change and, I hope, the beneficiaries of its fruits.

But major anniversaries are useful times to look back and ask whether we made the right decisions, whether they are still the right decisions, and whether we are still living faithfully in the spirit of those decisions.

When we decided to go down this track, we did so because we were convinced that worship mattered – that worship was absolutely central to our life together as a church and to the lives of each one of us as individuals. We took the bold decision of saying that worship wasn't something we could just compromise on and try to please everyone. It wasn't an easy decision and it did cost us a few friends at the time.

But a quarter of a century down the track, our worship life has clearly matured and deepened. We have grown into the approach we adopted and it has increasingly become a part of us. The patterns and prayers have sunk deep roots into us and take on a life of their own within the secret places of our hearts.

But on an anniversary, when we look back and ask, "Has it worked?" the first question that comes up is "How do you judge the value of something like this?" Feeling good about something is not necessarily a reliable guide to its lasting value and benefit. A junkie, in the euphoric rush just after a hit, will tell you that heroin is the greatest thing in the world. Track the impact on their lives over a couple of years though, and it's a different picture. So if we're asking "Has it worked?", then probably the first question is "what are we looking for?"

A lot of people – and I'm close to being one of them – would say that the question is wrong. They would say that worship is not something you do because of any results you are anticipating from it. It is not a means to an end – rather it is something you do because it is the only fitting response a creature can make to its creator. They would say that if you start looking for benefits from worship then you've turned it all around backwards and made it into just another self-help technique.

And they're right. Well almost right. They're right that we don't worship for what we get out of it. We worship because of who God is and because of what we have experienced of God in Christ. If worship made absolutely no difference to anything in the world except to God, then we'd still be right to do it and to do it to the absolute best of our ability.

But maybe they're just a little bit wrong because surely if we commit ourselves to doing as best we can that which is our ultimate purpose in life, then the implications will begin to shape our whole lives.

And maybe they're a little bit wrong because what happens as we gather here is not the sum total of our worship. What we do here each Sunday is directly related to what we offer to God in the rest of our lives. What we do here makes sense and is a true offering to God in as much as it expresses and symbolises the offering of our whole lives to God, our bodies, minds and spirits. If it doesn't, if what we do here doesn't relate to how we live, or even contradicts how we live, then it is a hypocrisy and a blasphemy, no matter how well we perform the liturgy.

We would be doing exactly what Paul, in the reading we heard from Ephesians, warns us against doing – we would be grieving the Holy Spirit. We would be making God embarrassed to be identified with us. We would be talking up our relationship with God here on Sundays, and then declaring by our behaviour through the week that those who relate to God are hypocrites and charlatans. We would bring shame and grief on our God.

Now, it is true that we always fall short of what we proclaim in our worship. Many of you will have heard me say that we deliberately proclaim a reality that is way beyond what we can yet live up to in order that we might continue to grow into it, so there is no doubt that there is a normal and understandable credibility gap. The question is, though, whether or not we are honest about that, and whether or not the gap is closing. And that's where we are back to asking what I think are legitimate questions about whether the chosen path of our worship life is bearing fruit in how we live our lives.

Which brings us to tonight's Bible reading from the letter to the Ephesians, because it gives us some valuable criteria to use in examining ourselves and our growth into the people God is calling us to be.

Ephesians, like most of Paul's letters, starts with some solid theological discussion and then it moves to this section that is down-to-earth practical. Paul is saying, in essence, that because of all these wonderful things about God and God's love for us, these are the practical implications for how we should live and behave and relate to one another.

In tonight's part he starts by saying there should be no deceit or pretence in our relationships with one another. Anger is often okay, he says, but be careful that it doesn't become an excuse for actions that are not okay. Work honestly. Make sure that what you say is not destructive, but generous and life-giving. No bitterness, no vindictiveness, no back stabbing, no mud-slinging, etc etc. Instead, set about becoming big-hearted, compassionate, tolerant, forgiving.

One of the key phrases he uses is the call to "be kind to one another." Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (Eph 4:32). I think this concept of kindness is very under-rated. We tend to see it as something soft and mushy and

perhaps needing to be held in tension with something more rigorous, something with a bit more backbone. But perhaps if we give some thought to just how difficult it is to build a culture of kindness in today's world, we will start to give kindness a bit more weight and respect.

The culture of how people interact with one another in today's world is increasingly being shaped by the dynamics of social media, and social media is first and foremost a profit driven product. The algorithms are not written to amplify material that will help make the world a better place; they are written to amplify material that will provoke reactions and therefore generate income for the platforms. And kindness, by its very nature, is not provocative. People like it and appreciate it, but it doesn't rouse their passions and get them reacting loudly online. Bitterness, anger, slander, and malice – the exact things our reading urged us to stay clear of – they are the things that do generate fiery reactions on social media, and so the algorithms amplify them and feed us more and more of them, making it harder and harder to avoid them.

Look at the nastiness that has swirled around social media about the Algerian boxer, Imane Khelif. On the basis of one false report from a discredited source that said she had once failed a gender test, all manner of conspiratorial nastiness flooded the socials, getting all the anti-trans people jumping up and down in a frenzy of outrage. All the available evidence says that Khelif is not even transgender. She was born female, and raised female. She just punches harder than most females. But that's the point of the Olympics surely? Every boxer in the female events can punch harder than most women. The gold medal was always going to go to the woman who could punch the hardest and fastest. That's what the gold medal is for.

But the culture of nastiness doesn't only turn on those who happen to be the best. The socials are also awash with nastiness about B-girl Raygun, the Australian who came last in the break dancing event. She's still a way better break dancer than any of the keyboard trolls spewing their venom in her direction, but that doesn't stop them, because spewing venom generates clicks and attention, and that's all the motivation some people need.

You see, it's not only about the toxic nastiness. It is also fuelling the cycle of disinformation, the opposite of our reading's call to speak the truth to our neighbours. What we now have is disinformation being generated and spread purely for profit and fame. It doesn't even start with people who've disappeared down the delusional rabbit hole of conspiracy theories. Investigations have shown that a number of the main conspiracy theories that sprang up around the attempted assassination of Donald Trump originated with people who didn't believe them for a moment, but who knew they would generate traffic to their websites and sales of their products. Very likely something similar was happening with the disinformation that fuelled the anti-immigration riots that followed the horrible stabbing of the young girls in England.

These things have no investment at all in trying to promote a culture of kindness, of compassion, of forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven us. And when there is a nasty social media pile-on, it takes genuine courage to stand up for a culture of kindness and forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven us. It becomes something that is difficult and dangerous to do. All of us are understandably afraid that the mob will turn on us and make us the next target. So there is nothing soft and fluffy about this call to be kind and to promote a culture of kindness.

And the writer of the letter to the Ephesians makes this clear by following that call to kindness immediately with, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

That is telling us that kindness is a key attribute of God, and so the pathway to growing in our capacity for kindness is to imitate what we have experienced of God in Jesus. It is also recognising that the love and kindness we have seen in Jesus, far from being soft and safe, were the very things that resulted in him giving himself up, making the ultimate sacrifice in the face of an angry toxic mob, rather than selling out kindness and love to protect himself.

So set about modelling yourself on God – the God you have seen in Jesus. It’s a no-nonsense, straight-forward call, that is the essence of what it means to be followers of Jesus, to be the Church. It is also all stuff that gives us criteria for looking at ourselves and asking whether or not we are becoming increasingly like that, and whether or not our participation in the church and its liturgy are encouraging and enabling us to become increasingly like that.

Our liturgy, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, makes the same movement as the letter to the Ephesians, moving from theology to practical application. There is the reading of scripture to listen to and meditate on. There is the table we gather at, symbolically offering ourselves to God and receiving God’s self-giving to us. And then in the final movement of our worship we do something that we should never mistake as just a wind down.

We link up what we’ve been doing in here with what we will do all week out there. We make a rather daunting statement of total commitment to God and then express it in some simple action statements. “We go out into the world and make it our first work to love. We bear witness with our words and our lives that the Reign of God has come.” There are additional lines drawn from our church covenant and from the scripture readings for the day, but they have basically the same thrust. These are the practical implications of what we’ve been saying and doing here in worship.

The true value of the shared worship we practice here is measured over time by the extent to which those implied practical expressions become true of the whole of our lives. Because it is that whole picture – the whole of our lives – that is the totality of our worship. The Apostle summarises it with a classic image of worship. He says that the life lived in love, in Christ-like self-giving love, is a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. If you aspire to offer true worship to God, the most pleasing gift that can be given to God is a life lived in kindness and love, a generous, self-giving kindness and love. And unless we’re growing into that, then what we are doing here will be shown to be a lot of rubbish.